

**Testimony by Most Reverend Ricardo Ramirez  
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**Hearing on the  
2005 International Religious Freedom Report  
of the US Department of State**

**Before the International Relations Committee  
of the United States House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations  
November 15, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, allow me to thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony before the committee on the topic of religious freedom. Let me also express my appreciation to you for your leadership in lifting up the importance of protecting religious freedom and helping to make it a more central priority for US foreign policy. While I am honored to be a member of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am here today representing the views of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. I serve as a member of the Conference's Committee on International Policy. The Committee's mandate includes the promotion of human rights and religious freedom. I will summarize my remarks and ask that my full written testimony be entered into the record.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops welcomes the increased attention to, and seeks greater priority for, the issue of religious freedom. The creation of the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom are hallmarks of a growing commitment to make international religious freedom central to US foreign policy. Our Conference vigorously advocated for the establishment of both of these essential structures. We work cooperatively with the Office and the Commission and appreciate their efforts on behalf of religious freedom. The 2005 report

issued last week on the status of religious freedom around the world is a vital sign of the importance of this issue and of the progress yet to be made for justice, freedom and world peace.

### **Our Experience and Perspective**

From the perspective of Catholic teaching, religious freedom is the first of our freedoms. The late Pope John Paul II said that “The most fundamental human freedom is that of practicing one’s faith openly, which for human beings is their reason for living.”<sup>1</sup> In its *Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae)*, the Second Vatican Council declared that “the right of religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and reason itself.”<sup>2</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights relies on human reason, and Catholic teaching is based on both reason and religious faith, but both the UN Declaration and Catholic teaching share the understanding that human dignity is the basis for human rights. This shared understanding has fostered collaboration among groups across a wide spectrum of the international community in promoting respect for the full range of inalienable and universal human rights, especially religious liberty.

It is essential to point out that religious liberty begins with the right to worship according to one’s conscience, but it does not end there. Religious freedom covers a broad range of vital activities, from freedom of worship to freedom of conscience, from the right to establish schools and charities to the right to participate in and seek to influence public affairs. Religious freedom properly understood is inextricably linked to other fundamental human rights, such as freedom of association, freedom of speech, and legal recognition of voluntary associations. Religious freedom is a right of both individuals and religious communities.

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<sup>1</sup> World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965 #2.

For the Catholic bishops religious freedom has many faces. As pastors within a universal Church, we hear the cries and share the pain of believers of all religions around the world who suffer persecution, violence and discrimination simply because they are people of faith. We stand in solidarity with our suffering brothers and sisters to offer our support and express their hopes. From religious persecution in the former Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, to the human rights struggles in Central and South America, from today's challenges to religious freedom in China and Vietnam, Sudan and Nigeria, to those in Russia and Saudi Arabia, the Holy Land and elsewhere, our Conference has worked—sometimes visibly, and sometimes of necessity quietly—to defend, promote and advance religious liberty. Delegations of our bishops' Conference have journeyed to many lands to express our solidarity. The Conference has issued public appeals for legal protections, protested killings and detentions, met with victims and promoted their rights and dignity with officials of the United States and foreign governments. Our Conference is committed to continuing this defense of, and advocacy for, religious freedom consistently and persistently.

In our activities, we listen carefully to the pleas of those who suffer persecution and discrimination and learn from their everyday experiences. We seek their counsel on how best to stand with them and help them to secure their rights. For us, this means consulting closely with local Catholic bishops, other religious leaders and with the Holy See. Our experience and conviction is that the victims of religious persecution are often the best informed sources of their situation and the most reliable providers of information and guidance.

During the Cold War, violations of religious freedom were largely state-sponsored. Dictatorial and oppressive regimes often sought to crush any opposition or expression of liberty. Religion, because it is so important to people's identity and self expression, was frequently a

deliberate target of state suppression. To allow religion a space in the public square was too dangerous for many regimes. Even though there has been a global resurgence of religion in the post Cold War era, we must remain vigilant in protecting religious freedom from state control and interference. While global communism has receded, China, Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea and other states still often attempt to control and interfere with religious belief and practice.

In our day there is also a new recognition of the pluralism of religious belief. We live shoulder to shoulder with others of different beliefs or no belief at all. Even in countries where one religion predominates, living in complete religious isolation is no longer possible. Religious pluralism is now a global phenomenon. Global communications make us a virtual village. Increased immigration makes us actual neighbors. These new realities can lead to either greater respect for others of differing religious belief or to potentially destructive conflicts. The challenge before all of us today is to help build a global culture of respect for religious freedom as a guarantor of human dignity and a contributor to justice.

### **Two Major Challenges**

Before commenting on countries mentioned in the recently released 2005 report on religious freedom by the Department of State, I wish to highlight two broad trends that we believe deserve greater attention.

First, we believe governments and elected officials have an important role to play in valuing and safeguarding the proper place of religion in public life. While the state and religion clearly differ in their roles, they share a goal of building up the common good for the benefit of the entire society. This value is enshrined in constitutional principle by protecting the autonomy of government and religious institutions but assuring the means by which they can cooperate over shared interests in education, healthcare, and public welfare. Faith should be respected and

welcomed in public life and the particular character of religious communities should be valued along with other forms of association and civic engagement. History teaches that societies in which faith is marginalized and impoverished are diminished societies.

We recognize that the issue of religious freedom in our own nation does not come under the purview of this Subcommittee; however, if the United States is to be a leader in supporting religious freedom, we must acknowledge that our nation's treatment of religious freedom impacts the credibility of U.S. leadership as our nation seeks to influence other peoples and countries that look to us as an example.

Let me turn to a second concern. Perhaps the most significant challenge to religious freedom and forging constructive roles for religion in world affairs is the relationship between Christianity and Islam. The violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and several conflicts in Africa come dangerously close to being perceived, in simplistic terms, as a new contest of east versus west, of Islam versus Christianity.

This challenge requires careful and deep reflection, respectful dialogue and candid discussion. Like Christianity, Islam is a religion with different expressions. Tensions among these expressions of Islam have been exacerbated by the rise of militant Islam and the misuse and perversion of faith to justify violence. In our own dialogue with Islamic leaders, we hear these kinds of questions: How will societies meet the social, political and economic aspirations and needs of their citizens? Will violence against the innocent be repudiated and resisted? What religious vision of Islam will gain ascendancy in the hearts and minds of Muslims—a more tolerant, inclusive and engaged Islam, or a more fundamentalist, exclusive, isolationist Islam? All religions, including Christianity, have in the past and are today wrestling with similar

questions. It is a source of pain to acknowledge that as Christians, we have at times failed to extend the tolerance and understanding that we ourselves expect.

The perception of a contest between east and west is exacerbated by the experience of colonialism that is remembered by many in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The introduction of outside secular influences often causes tensions in these societies. These conflicts in turn can lead some in the Islamic world to conclude, rightly or wrongly, that their culture and religious beliefs are under assault by the West. In this context misuse and distortions of religion tragically serve the political goals of extremists. Terrorism is used for many purposes, none defensible, including the goal of coercing other Muslims to abandon their own convictions and adopt a more extreme version of Islam. Casting their conflict as one with Christianity, or with Judaism, extremists attempt to make their political causes seem as religious obligations.

The response of major political leaders in the West has been to declare that the struggle against terrorism is not a war against Islam. Our Conference supports this view. But political leaders alone are unable to offer a satisfactory response to this challenging situation. Religious leaders must assist by entering into serious dialogue that seeks deeper understanding.

In *The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, the Second Vatican Council declared its “esteem” for Muslims and committed the Church to interfaith dialogue. Authentic dialogue cannot be just vague expressions of good will, empty of a search for truth and unity. Genuine interreligious dialogue can only be a force to heal divisions if dialogue safeguards and respects the truth in each religion and culture. Attempts to denigrate or distort the particular character, beliefs or practices of respective religious communities can itself be an offense against human dignity and basic human rights.

Efforts to compel religions to alter fundamental tenets or moral principles can lead to further stumbling blocks on the path to peace.

Promoting religious freedom and improving relations between Christians and Muslims are complementary goals that demand honesty, intellectual rigor and commitment to one's own faith tradition. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his August 20 meeting with Muslim leaders:

“Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity....” Both the Holy See and our Conference are carrying forward important dialogues with Islamic leaders to deepen understanding and to determine what can be done cooperatively. Dialogue can clarify differences, increase understanding and reduce tensions. Our bishops' Conference remains committed to this vital task.

### **The Religious Freedom Report and Country Concerns**

Mr. Chairman, I will offer very brief commentary on a few of the issues raised in the Report on International Religious Freedom, concentrating principally on those countries with which our Bishops' Conference has concerned itself in recent years. I emphasize that these remarks are not comprehensive and refer you to more detailed articulations of our concerns.

*Iraq.* The efforts of the Iraqi people to determine their own future are commendable and we hope they will lead to a stable democracy that respects the full range of human rights, including religious freedom. However, we are very concerned about the religious freedom provisions of the new constitution adopted in October. While the constitution includes key affirmations of basic human rights, including some helpful language regarding religious freedom, it also contains contradictory and ambiguous language that is deeply troubling and confusing. Even though the constitution promotes the concept of religious freedom, some

provisions circumscribe religious liberty by not allowing any law to contradict the principles of Islam and by authorizing the appointment of experts in Islamic law to serve on the Supreme Court, even if they have no training in civil law.

These concerns are alarming to the Chaldo-Assyrian community and other religious minorities within Iraq. Chaldean Patriarch Emmanuel Delly III of Baghdad met with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari on September 18 requesting that Article 2.1(a) be removed from the constitution. This article states that “no law that contradicts the established provisions of Islam may be established.” The Patriarch, together with other bishops and religious leaders of other minority communities, rightfully worry about the possibility of discrimination, second class citizenship and persecution unless the constitution and laws that will implement the constitution guarantee full and unhindered religious freedom. Already thousands of Christians and other minorities have fled Iraq fearing discrimination and persecution in the wake of repeated instances of violence and harassment. Our own Conference has made these serious concerns known to the Administration and other government officials and expressed our solidarity with the Church in Iraq. We hope that the U.S. government, the Congress and this subcommittee will encourage Iraqis to adopt implementing legislation that respects religious freedom.<sup>3</sup>

*The Fundamental Agreement with Israel.* Our Conference very much welcomed the Fundamental Agreement of 1993 between the Holy See and the State of Israel and the mutual recognition that it brought about. The Fundamental Agreement is needed to govern the legal status of the Church in Israel, but we are deeply dismayed at the lack of progress over the last dozen years. We fear there may be a lack of commitment on the part of elements of the

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<sup>3</sup> cf. Letter to Secretary Condoleezza Rice and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, Bishop John Ricard, August 8, 2005; Letters to Secretary Colin Powell and Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi on Iraqi Christians, Bishop John Ricard, October 22, 2004.



government of Israel to conclude successfully the negotiations with the Holy See over economic matters and other vital concerns to the Catholic Church and the wider Christian community in the Holy Land. We should be clear that the institutions whose tax status is under discussion in the 1993 agreement with the Holy See are at the service of the people of the Holy Land and are not simply investments or holdings of the Vatican. Our concerns as Catholic bishops for the Church in the Holy Land do not ignore or minimize the suffering of Israelis and Palestinians in that conflicted region. However, we believe the issues between the government of Israel and the Holy See are of great importance for religious liberty, not only for the Catholic Church but for the vitality of the all Christian communities within Israel. We urge the Administration and Congress to address these matters with the government of Israel and to encourage these essential negotiations to move forward expeditiously and judiciously to a resolution satisfactory to both parties.<sup>4</sup>

*The People's Republic of China.* I had the privilege of visiting China last August as part of a delegation of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Peoples Republic of China continues to present a serious and unavoidable challenge to religious freedom. The state-approved and state-controlled religions, including the registered Roman Catholic Church, are apparently freer today than they were some few years ago, and are treated better than they were during the years of harshest persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, control over the everyday life of the Church, less intrusive in some places than in others, still represents an unwarranted interference of the State in the life of the Church. The Chinese

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Letter to Secretary-Designate Condoleezza Rice on Negotiations between Israel and the Holy See, Bishop William Skylstad, January 13, 2005; Letter to Ambassador Daniel Ayalon on Negotiations between Israel and the Holy See, Bishop William Skylstad, January 18, 2005; Letter to Ambassador Ayalon on Visas for Church Personnel in the Holy Land, Cardinal William Keeler and Bishop John Ricard, April 7, 2004; Letter to President George W. Bush on the Deteriorating Situation in the Holy Land, Bishop Wilton Gregory, April 13, 2004.

Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), the government agency that monitors the activity of the Church, is an offensive anachronism that, one hopes, will disappear in time.

As is widely known, the unregistered Catholic Church suffers far greater and unacceptable restrictions. Its bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders are under constant surveillance, many have been arrested and jailed for simply carrying out their sacramental ministry, and not a few have paid the ultimate price for their uncompromising fidelity to their faith. The Church in the U.S. continues to stand with and support the rights of our Chinese sisters and brothers in faith. The U.S. should do the same in concrete and continuing ways. Fortunately there are indications in recent months that the “two faces of the Church in China,” as the Holy See has often referred to the Catholic community in China, are overcoming in practice some of the divisions that the State seeks to perpetuate. Also in recent months, we are hopeful that the long break between the Holy See and the Chinese government, begun with the 1951 expulsion of the Vatican representative, may come to an end. As the U.S. pursues its economic, diplomatic, military and other relationships with China, religious liberty and other human rights matters must have a central and continuing place in the U.S.-China dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

*The Indian Subcontinent—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.* These three countries have relatively small, but disproportionately influential Christian, including Catholic, minorities. In each of them, there have been shameful attacks on Christians, resulting in the burning of churches, false accusations of blasphemy—a capital offense in some Muslim states—and not a few killings. In each country, the State has stated or made excuses about its inability to control isolated groups of fanatics, but it seems abundantly clear that much more can be done to insist

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<sup>5</sup> cf. Letter to Chinese Ambassador on Detained Priests and Bishops, Bishop John Ricard, March 11, 2005; Letter to Chinese Ambassador on Arrest of Priests, Bishop John Ricard, August 24, 2004; Letter to President George W. Bush on Religious Freedom in China, Bishop Wilton Gregory, February 13, 2002.

that each of these states act with greater conformity with international law and greater respect for religious rights.<sup>6</sup>

*Burma.* The decades-long pattern of the denial of fundamental human rights, including religious rights, in Burma is well known. The situation in Burma clearly merits consistent and active monitoring and requires a serious effort to work for greater freedom and respect for human rights and religious liberty, but we would register the opposition of the Catholic Church in Burma to the imposition of economic sanctions as counter-productive and as likely to impact most harshly the vulnerable in society.

*Cuba.* The state of religious freedom in Cuba has gone through several phases since 1959. From the outright persecution and expulsion of clergy and religious sisters and brothers of the early years to the present, the Catholic Church, in particular, continues to experience unacceptable limitations on its life and mission.

In Cuba parents are not free to choose alternatives to the state schools for the education of their children and the Church is not free to conduct such schools. In recent years the Church has been able to publish a number of small diocesan papers, but is still denied access to the major media. Some clergy and other church workers from abroad have been permitted to work in Cuba for a set period of time, but the majority of requests for visas have not been granted. Church services are held freely throughout the country, but Cuban bishops have noted that there has been an increase in the number of State Security agents attending Mass with the evident purpose of discouraging any dissident behavior. This practice has been especially observed at Havana's St.

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Letter to Indian Ambassador on Anti-Christian Attacks, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, February 22, 1999; Letter to Pakistani Ambassador on Intolerance in Bahawalpur, Cardinal Bernard Law, November 2, 2001; Letter to President Bush on Violence in Bahawalpur, Cardinal Bernard Law, November 2, 2001; Letter to Secretary Albright on religious Freedom, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, December 2, 1998; Letter to Pakistani Ambassador on Blasphemy Law, Bishop Daniel Reilly, February 22, 1995.

Rita's Church where the Damas de Blanco, the Ladies in White, gather weekly for Mass and then hold their peaceful march in support of their imprisoned husbands. These women have just been awarded the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize. Most of their husbands were part of the 2003 arrests of independent journalists and of people associated with the Varela Project of Oswaldo Payá. Our Conference has strongly urged their release.

The Constitution of 1976 states that it "is illegal and punishable by law to oppose one's faith or religious belief to the Revolution." As in other countries under Communist rule, the Communist Party has an Office of Religious Affairs which maintains strict control over church activities. This necessarily represents a type of interference in the freedom of religion that is incompatible with human rights and religious freedom.<sup>7</sup> As strongly as we stand with the bishops and Church in Cuba over the issue of religious freedom, we join them in opposing the embargo as an ineffective and counter-productive policy that harms the poor and the vulnerable and gives the Cuban regime an excuse for its own failed policies.<sup>8</sup>

*Russian Federation.* Another nation that has gone through dramatic changes in recent years is the Russian Federation. While the Catholic Church has seen some improvements in the last two years, the overall situation of human rights remains tenuous, uncertain and in some ways is deteriorating. Local officials often act on legitimate religious concerns arbitrarily and unfairly. For these reasons, developments in Russia require continued careful monitoring and government

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Letter to Hon. José Serrano on Travel Restrictions to Cuba, Bishop John Ricard, July 19, 2005; Cuba Background Paper, USCCB Department of Social Development and World Peace, February 2005; Letter to House of Representatives on Travel to Cuba, Bishop John Ricard, July 22, 2004; Statement on Arrest of Cuban Dissidents, Bishop John Ricard, April 8, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> We also note that the US Office of Foreign Assets Control has recently changed its policy for the issuance of travel licenses to Cuba that hinder the ability of religious entities to engage in religious activities in Cuba. This new policy is a hostile treatment to religious entities that are mediating communities distinct from the Cuban regime.

leaders need appropriate encouragement to observe, practice and comply with international norms regarding fundamental human rights and religious freedom.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As a religious community, our own faith and our respect for the faith of others commits us to defend and promote religious freedom as a moral priority and human responsibility. We seek to protect the right of our Church and all other religious communities to exist and to express their faith in society and the public sphere as well as in private worship. Our bishops' Conference defends the right of religious communities to engage in public debate and to offer their moral vision, their values and their view of the common good. What our government says and does to protect and promote religious freedom and to advance other human rights has much to say about what kind of society we are and how our nation can exert a positive or negative influence on others.

Our own society needs to understand better the contributions that religious communities can make toward the resolution of conflicts and the building up of a culture of justice and peace. There is little doubt that we must devote more attention to understanding and engaging Islam. This direction is imperative in today's world and perhaps the most significant challenge we face.

Promoting religious freedom is critical to the Church's life and mission and to international peace. It is also at the heart of our nation's principles. The cause of religious liberty must be a fundamental priority in our nation's foreign policy and in our country's own internal life. My hope is that this religious freedom report and the work of our government, in cooperation with religious communities and human rights advocates, can advance religious

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<sup>9</sup> cf. Letter to Representatives Young and Kolbe on Religious Freedom in Georgia, Bishop John Ricard, October 27, 2003; Letter to the Embassy of the Russian Federation on Actions Taken against the Catholic Church in Russia, Gerard Powers, April 23, 2003.

freedom and human rights in important and concrete ways. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “The defense of religious freedom...is a permanent imperative....”